

## Why Not Faith Alone? by Pastor Marty

Last month, I began a series on the five “Solas” of the Protestant Reformation. Considering this last year marked 500 years since the date Luther posted his 95 theses at Wittenberg, it seems useful to discuss some of the ramifications of that action. Of course, any student of history knows that not all five were specifically mentioned by the reformers themselves, but the list accurately reflects the main issues they presented. I started with a discussion of *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone) and explained how the premise has been taken to an unhealthy extreme in cases. This can easily be seen by the fact that there are thousands of denominations as well as a countless number of non-denominational churches. Now, I do believe there is a valid basis for having different styles of churches: they match personalities in the same way there are different types of education to match different learning styles. However, many of the variations in denominations or churches are due to significant differences in how the Bible has been interpreted—and they are so contradictory that they simply cannot all be correct. The Early Church put a great deal of time and thought into developing the creeds precisely to keep believers from deviating from the faith “handed down from the eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.” Making each believer a final authority on interpretation of Scripture opened a door for some bad theology and worse practices. However, returning to an institutional religious structure could easily become as bad as it was in the middle ages—especially if human opinion is equated with divine inspiration. Instead, I suggest that we consider modifying our belief of *Sola Scriptura* to something closer to *Prima Scriptura*: Scripture is the Primary judge of faith and life. This would mean that reason, tradition, and experience all have some influence toward our theology and practice, but Scripture overrides everything else.

***Reason, tradition, and experience count, but Scripture itself overrides them all.***

The second Sola I want to discuss is *Sola Fide*, the concept of “Faith Alone” for salvation. For us to recognize how this premise has been taken to an extreme, we have to understand the nature of the problem the reformers tried to correct. Many people claim the Roman Catholic Church taught people to earn salvation by works. However, that statement is somewhat misleading. Before we can discuss what Roman Catholics believed back then, we need to understand the different worldview. Prior to the Enlightenment, people viewed the world in terms of mystery and magic, not science and reason. In many ways, it was more conducive to the core beliefs of the Early Church. Christians did not view “the Church” the way we view it today. Prior to both the Protestant and Roman Catholic reformations, all Christians believed the Church was the visible assembly of professing believers. Of course, Augustine himself declared that not everyone who was baptized and claimed to be a Christian was actually one, but neither he nor anyone else thought it possible that any true Christian would not associate with the visible assembly of believers. The idea of a person “doing their own thing” was inconceivable (and yes, that word means what I think it means). Jesus declared that His disciples would be known (recognized, evaluated, and identified) by their fruit—by their life and actions. Rejecting “the Church” was considered synonymous with denying Jesus Himself. We have to remember that the Roman Catholic Church of the time was THE congregation of Christians in the Western world as the Eastern Orthodox Church was THE body of believers in the Eastern world. Except for a couple isolated groups, there were no other options. Paul’s command to “not forsake assembling together” was taken to mean exactly that, and rejecting the appointed leadership was considered as heretical then as it was in Paul’s time.

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Since people viewed the Church as the physical assembly of believers, a person's faith toward God was associated with a commitment to the visible institution as well as an observable lifestyle. Just as is the case now, anyone claiming to be a disciple of Christ while living contrary to His commands was considered hypocritical. Of course, as is also the case today, this was more of the ideal than the reality. However, one thing was different then than now: faith was believed to be directly connected with acts. Some churches do preach and teach this concept, but it is understood in an entirely different way now. The Medieval Church believed that faith normally arose from acts of obedience, commitment, service, and worship. In other words, people would make a choice to follow God, and faith would develop as a fruit of those actions. They relied strongly on the Hebrews 11:6 definition of faith: the person coming to God must believe (1) He exists and (2) He rewards those who seek Him. Acts of worship and service was a way to seek God, and they believed that He would reward them for doing them. Those acts could be anything from regular times of prayer to ministering to the sick. They understood these actions as intrinsic parts of a relationship of faith. Of course, many had a desire and belief in God before they did the acts, but this would normally be viewed as having a calling to live a life of faith. Over time—and as people began to go through the motions without really understanding the concept—there arose some interpretation of the acts of service and worship as earning salvation from God; however, that was not the original intent. As an educated and insightful monk, Martin Luther recognized that many of the common people were misunderstanding faith, so he attempted to correct their misconceptions. He realized that if people viewed their works of service or donations to the Church as a way to buy God's favor, it would undermine real faith. In reaction, he began stressing the saving faith instead of the acts.

***Luther began stressing faith instead of the acts people commonly associated with faith.***

In a significant way, Luther caused the pendulum to swing from one extreme to another. In his attempt to stop people from relying on works, he put their reliance entirely on faith. The problem here is that our sinful nature will seek, find, and exploit any perceivable loophole. Christians began to rely solely upon "faith" without fully understanding what it means. The Protestant arm of the Church has become so focused on salvation by faith that significant warnings have been overlooked. The concept of Sola Fide (Faith Alone) is only one part of the whole story, and when it is made into the whole story, the message loses its context. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, there are indications that faith and works have to go together. However, many Christians since the time of the Protestant Reformation have focused entirely on the "faith" aspect. This was not as much of a problem during the early part of the Reformation as it is today because people back then still largely understood faith as comprising both the heart and the mind. However, the "Enlightenment" brought us into an age where people often associate mental ascent and faith as being equivalent when they are not. The will is very tied to conscious decisions, but the emotions and passions—or the "affections" as adherents to Wesley often describe them—go much deeper. When we describe faith in God as being primarily mental in its scope, we lose a large portion of the Christian spiritual life. In effect, we have simply exchanged one type of hypocrisy for another. As Roman Catholics are apt to point out to Protestants, there is only one place in the Bible where "faith" and "alone" are used together—and it is not in a very positive light. After describing how Abraham obeyed God's command, James declares that his faith was perfected by his works. He then declares that we are "justified by works and not by faith alone." Abraham had faith, but that faith required him to follow through with works; it was not enough to "just believe" alone. Most of the letter of James is Godsplaining how faith without accompanying actions is not real faith.

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Similar to last month's newsletter, I want to suggest that we might better understand what Luther was trying to do if we replaced the idea of *Sola Fide* with the concept of *Prima Fide*—Faith is Primary. This replacement works precisely because the word “primary” has two common definitions: it can mean highest in importance, and it can mean first in appearance. Both of these interpretations can correct the overcompensation that has followed since the Enlightenment. If we begin to describe faith as primary, we are suggesting that salvation begins with an act of faith. This should not be difficult for anyone in the Church—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant—to accept. As it says in the Hebrews, we cannot please God without faith. Over and over again, the Gospels and Acts describe salvation in terms of believing, and although making a confession and being baptized are sometimes included, believing is always present. However, we also describe faith as “primary” because it is rarely ever alone. Paul, the apostle who discusses salvation more than anyone else, states that confession leads to salvation while believing leads to righteousness. Paul and James are not disagreeing when they describe salvation by faith and by works; they are explaining how neither one can function all by itself.

***Paul and James are describing how faith and works fit together for our salvation.***

This cooperation of faith with works has been recognized to a partial degree: Roman Catholics increasingly describe the need for faith in the sacraments of baptism, communion, and confirmation because they realize that an act without faith has little profit; Protestants increasingly describe works as fruit after a person is saved because they have observed people saying the sinner's prayer and going no further. However, Roman Catholics and Protestants haven't yet been able to agree completely. Part of the problem is due to very different definitions for the word “salvation” in the Church. On the one hand, suggesting someone can say a prayer and never have to do anything else seems to significantly conflict with numerous Bible passages, not only in James but also with the very significant parable by Jesus on the sheep and the goats; on the other hand, suggesting nobody can be certain of personal salvation until death significantly contradicts the words of Paul and the author of Hebrews. Therefore, many theologians describe past/present/future aspects of salvation: from God's perspective, we were saved 2000 years ago when He died for us, we are saved now by the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, and we will be saved when He reads our names from the Book of Life at the final judgment; from the Protestant perspective, we were saved when we made Jesus Lord, we are being saved as we follow Him, and we will be saved when we enter eternity; and from the Roman Catholic perspective, we were saved at our baptism, we are being saved as we participate in the life of Christ, and we will be saved when we stand before God. Many also now use terms like redemption, justification, and sanctification.

***Salvation is so comprehensive and expansive that it cannot be defined in just one way.***

I am suggesting that *Prima Fide* is a better concept for us today because it describes not only a trust in God but also an accompanying lifestyle. Over and over again, passages in the Bible declare that obedience, service, and fruit are intrinsically connected to a life of discipleship. Paul tells us we have to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” If we attempt to live an un-worked faith, we will find ourselves living out the parable of the fruitless tree—which is not a very pleasant concept. Putting faith first (but not alone) will also prevent us from relying upon our works to save us because we will realize that faith precedes actions as much as it grows from them. If we think about it, we will see that it was no coincidence that Jesus described the Church as both salt and light; both are created things that exist (faith) while they also cause a change in other things (works). *Prima Fide* recognizes that we sometimes do the right thing just because it is the right thing to do, and it suggests we might still find a reward.